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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the implementation of a peer-evaluation system in a college-level English methods class. Specifically, a system was developed in which the responsibility for preteaching planning sessions, observation, identification of teaching competencies, and post observation analysis of lessons was shifted to groups of three students each. Student evaluation of the "trio system" indicated that most felt some form of the system should be extended into student teaching--a suggestion that was later put into action. A six-page evaluation form for the assessment of teaching competencies completes the discussion. (KS)

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Peer Evaluation in a Field-Based English Methods Course

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Conference on English Education

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Peer evaluation--this is something we talk about a good deal in our English methods courses, isn't it? "A teacher can't and shouldn't read everything the kids write," we note, "unless they write only a little. Let the kids respond to and evaluate each other's writing. When they know that other kids will read what they write, your students will instinctively assign more importance to the task. Kid audiences are real audiences, not like teachers," we go on, "and remember, the process of responding and evaluating probably has as much positive impact on the evaluator as it does on the writer."

Fine and dandy. I'm sure a number of you have the same sermonette, padded by reference to research or made more eloquent and authoritative by quoting Jim Moffett, Chapter 3, verses 3-7, stashed away somewhere in your lecture notes. Too often, though, we fail to see the possibilities of practicing what we preach. Recent experience has taught me, however, that peer evaluation among English methods students is both workable and effective, broadening the base of evaluative data received by the teacher trainee, rendering both the evaluator and evaluated more aware of the elements of competent teaching, and developing a sense of cooperation and concern among young teachers that, in some instances, has carried on through student teaching and beyond.

Last fall, fifteen students, a bumper crop for our small undergraduate program at Columbus College, enrolled in my English methods course. Each student was to spend thirty hours of contact time with me, on campus, thirty hours with a curriculum specialist, and between seventy and eighty hours in a local school, working under an English teacher I would be able to select. Off-campus experience would begin after the third week, gradually increasing from six hours a week to fifteen near the end of the quarter. "Teachweek," during which each student would teach two secondary English

classes for five days, loomed in the distance. In the meantime, my role would be to help them clarify philosophical assumptions about the teaching of English, learn how to plan, gain a perspective on English and language arts curriculum, and develop a five-day plan or mini-unit for "Teachweek." Additionally, I would probably need to lend a shoulder on which to cry out insecurities and misgivings about whether high school kids could be kept from throwing erasers, desks, and each other around while a novice was, nominally, the teacher. That's all.

I was used to working with no more than five or six methods students at a time. Fifteen of them though, presented problems. Hour long planning conferences with each student? Unlikely. Two one-hour observations during "Teachweek?" Mathematically and geographically impossible, especially since most would be teaching in the morning, and at seven different schools. Detailed post-observation conferences? Perhaps, but not in the careful, step-by-step and time-consuming way I had used in the past. And what about this seemingly endless list of competencies that each student was to have mastered? No, I'd never be able to affirm to all fifty-four of them. Something would have to give.

But I didn't want to be like the composition teacher who reluctantly starts assigning bi-weekly papers in order to cut the load of paperwork. No, these young men and women deserved better than that. What I realized was that they deserved each other, and that they, in their own way, would be as good as I am at pre-teaching planning sessions, observation, identification of competencies indicated or not, and post-observation analysis of lessons. My own role could be what it had been, in an abbreviated sense, and I could devote additional effort to helping them do for each other what I had previously done alone.

By the second meeting, students were assigned to trios, which I defined as "mutual support groups" with each member contributing to and responsible for the performance of the others. "Teachweek" would expand to "Teachtime," eight days instead of five, with two days reserved for visiting other trio members in the midst of teaching, and the eighth day included for insurance sake, in case of difficulties in scheduling visits for trio members, illness, or other problems.

My first goal for trio members was that they get to know each other well and become accustomed to working together. The general informality of the class, the use of ice-breakers--both to break our own ice and to consider their utility in the English classroom--and several small-group activities I assigned helped build a sense of familiarity and purpose, both for trios and for the whole group. Clearly, we were okay people involved in something importanct and pleasurable.

It was also necessary to introduce students to the notion of teaching competencies, since the observation-evaluation instrument they would use later off-campus is competency-based. (See Attachment.) For our third meeting, therefore, I asked students to consult sources other than our text to gather statements on what English teachers ought to be able to do when they teach. On the day the assignments were due, trios worked for thirty minutes compiling a list of competencies, stated in order of importance, which each trio member could support. The five lists were then compared. I then distributed copies of the Secondary Block Evaluation form, asking that students look over the list before our next meeting. The next day, a general discussion of the competency-based approach was conducted. The following questions were among those we considered:

> What should an observer look for if he is interested in gathering evidence of a specific competency?

> Should there be minimum performance levels for a competency? If so, what is a reasonable level for students in the field prior to student teaching?
>
> How do teachers acquire competencies in the first place? What should the methods instructor's role be? The methods student's role?
>
> What about competencies that involve attitudes and philosophy? Can they be measured? Should they?
>
> What are the advantages and disadvantages of the competency-based approach to training and certification? Is a teacher with all these competencies by definition a "good teacher"? How could such a claim be validated or disproved?

I, like many of you, have real reservations about a no-holds-barred competency-based program, which I promptly admitted to these students. However, I do accept the importance of careful delineation of objectives and careful measurement of what a methods student or student teacher actually does in the classroom. For these fifteen students, what I told them I wanted most is what might be called "competency consciousness," the gist of which is that specific elements of good teaching do exist, that they can and have been defined at least in part, and that the novice teacher's task is to deliberately work on developing or refining his skills. I, too, would have to be "competency-conscious," trying to practice what the competencies preached in my own teaching and providing instruction designed to nurture competency growth. But the ultimate burden, I explained, would be theirs--inevitably and cooperatively theirs.

By the time students were sent into the field, trios were functioning more or less as intended, and individual students were aware of the competencies the course was designed to generate. Cooperating teachers and principals, in turn, had been informed of the new trio program, had received copies of the evaluation form, and knew that, in addition to the methods student assigned to the school, two "outsiders" would be visiting late in the quarter. By design, trio members had been assigned to different schools, and at least one trio member had been placed at the junior high school

level, therby complementing the depth gained in one classroom with the breadth of different teachers, different students, and even differing perspectives on curriculum.

The early weeks of off-campus activity, perhaps the first twenty of the total eighty hours, centered on a general orientation to the students, teacher, and insturctional program at the host school, with the methods student playing a basically passive role, at least in comparison to what was coming. Students met weekly on compus with me, one of my functions being that of putting in some perspective what went on in the real world. By mid-quarter, students were, in general, on top of the situation in the field, had learned the names of students and had worked with them enough to know they didn't bite, and were full of encouraging and dismal anecdotes about what teaching was all about. Most were beginning to look toward Teachtime, still three or four weeks away, and had discussed with cooperating teachers what they might be teaching then. Whenever possible, it should be explained here, I select cooperating teachers who can prop up an insecure methods student, will get reasonably out of the way of a student who is full of ideas, and who--for Teachtime--provide freedom within limits, giving my student a guide to what might be taught, but allowing real breathing room in selection of both content and teaching strategy.

On the mid-quarter examination, I wanted to measure how well my "competency-consciousness" scheme was working, so I included the following essay question.

> Please refer back to the Secondary Block Evaluation form distributed early in the quarter. Then discuss three to five competencies listed on the form you believe your cooperating teacher exhibits to a high degree. Explain, referring to events that have happened in your cooperating teacher's classroom.

Judging from the results, this question served to teach as well as test,

heightening student awareness that competencies are not abstractions and that the alert observer can muster specific data suggesting their presence in teacher behaviors. This would be of benefit during Teachtime, when they would be engaged in formal observation.

The real work of the trios was now ready to begin. First, two weeks before Teachtime, trios met for an hour to discuss tentative plans for their mini-units, to schedule days for cross-visitation, to share concerns about likely problems they were to have with students, with cooperating teachers, or even with me. I explained that their task was to examine teaching plans, playing devil's advocate, looking for trouble spots where student attention might lag, where teacher talk might dominate unproductively, where directions or questions might be vague. One week later, I would meet with trios in order to review my perceptions about each student's "Final Tentative Plan," revised on the basis of ideas gained from trio members and the cooperating teacher. As necessary, I would spend fifteen to twenty minutes with each student, or about an hour with the trio, all three members sharing in the analysis of each emerging mini-unit.

A second task of the trios grew out of my realization that the evaluation form was probably too long to be workable, too long for both methods student and overburdened cooperating teacher. When I posed this idea, the class agreed. I decided, therefore, to ask each student to identify ten "pivotal competencies," achievement of which, for him, was both necessary and probable during Teachtime. A list of pivotal competencies was submitted, to which I added a second ten from those remaining on the evaluation instrument. These I individualized, trying to select competencies which related to the strengths and weaknesses of the student as I perceived them. During a final pre-Teachtime meeting, trios shared lists of twenty pivotal competencies, noting what behaviors each hoped to exhibit as indicators of the competency in question.

This process of selecting what my students called "Big Deal Competencies," while arrived at out of necessity, was, in retrospect, one of the best things the trios did. Rather than trying to be all things in ten hours of teaching, students were able to focus in on what was both personally significant and achievable. My role in identifying ten additional competencies served to balance each student's list. Through observation of other students, finally, each student's awareness of competencies chosen by others would be maintained.

Teachtime was eight days of frenzied but productive activity among all concerned. My role became in part that of referee, making sure that principals knew who was going to be where when, scheduling my own observations in a way that did not conflict with trio visits, and conferencing with cooperating teachers about last-minute details. Additionally, I fulfilled my usual function of advising students on the basis of problems they brought to my attention or ones I observed in their teaching.

By the end of the eight days, my class began taking on the mannerisms of a troup of veterans, tired, reasonably successful, having experienced the sounds and smells of battle. One final job remained for trios. Through each peer observation, students worked with the block evaluation form, on which had been circled the twenty pivotal competencies chosen earlier. When we met on the first day following Teachtime, each student received the written evaluations of two other students. Trios then met for an hour to share their evaluations, having been advised by me that what was said on the forms was for trio members only, and would not be shared with me. This, I felt, would help my students be honest with each other without worrying about grades or how I would perceive negative criticisms of their teaching. The final trio meeting was followed by private sessions with me, in which evaluative statements made by me, the cooperating teacher, and the student himself were reviewed.

Peer evaluation through trio groups was, of course, only one aspect of the English methods course this past fall. What, though, were the results of this effort? Was it worth it?

In order to find out, I asked students to briefly evaluate the trio approach. The results of this informal assessment indicate that students responded favorably to working in trios and gained important insights into themselves, teaching, and other trio members. Of fourteen students completing the anonymous evaluation, twelve indicated that the trio program was either "helpful" or "very helpful"; two, on the other hand, checked "not sure." Ten indicated that they wanted some form of the trio program to extend into student teaching.

Class members indicated that insights gained from the trio arrangement were of three basic kinds: self knowledge, knowledge about others, and knowledge about schools and/or teaching. To be sure, what was learned did not differ much from lessons I had been trying to get across on my own, but--because the sources of these ideas were other students--I feel they may have a better chance of sticking and not be lost in the first year of teaching, as so often happens to teaching ideals. It is my hope that one or two key bits of implicit learning took place--first, that students grasped the notion that teaching doesn't have to be the lonesome task it sometimes is; and, second, that good teaching involves cooperation and honest criticism by both self and others.

When asked to identify problems with the trio system, students made numerous suggestions, most of which dealt with the difficulty of scheduling trio meetings, the need to more carefully define individual responsibilities toward the trio, and an occasional complaint about the failings of specific trio members. One or two would have preferred choosing their own trios, an arrangement I had rejected in order to make each

group as heterogenous as possible. Undoubtedly, something was lost as well as gained in assigning group members myself.

With some revision, the trio system has extended into student teaching. This past winter, I worked with six English student teachers, each of whom was released for two "professional days" to observe and critique two others. Weekly seminars on campus found trios working together on a variety of activities and projects designed to help student teachers deal with problems I had observed. How well the trios have functioned during student teaching is a moot point. There is some indication that winter quarter student teachers have been too preoccupied with their own problems to become more than politely interested in what others were doing, but this seeming disinterest may have resulted from days lost due to the energy crisis or simply the personalities of this group of student teachers. Another quarter will give me a better idea of what's what with trios during student teaching.

• It seems logical enough to end where I began several minutes ago. Peer evaluation in English methods? Give it a try. You may find that all you've said about this approach to your students holds true for them as well as adolescents.

COLUMBUS COLLEGE
SECONDARY BLOCK EVALUATION--ASSESSMENT OF TEACHING COMPETENCIES

STUDENT'S NAME_____ QUARTER_____

SCHOOL_____ SUBJECT/GRADE_____

EVALUATOR'S NAME_____ # HOURS OBSERVED_____

CHECK ONE: MAY THE STUDENT BE INFORMED OF YOUR EVALUATIONS?
yes ( ); no ( )

EVALUATOR'S
SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

CHECK YOUR CLASSIFICATION:

___methods students
___cooperating block teacher
___other teacher
___secondary block (college) instructor
___student teacher

___other (specify)_____
_____

INSTRUCTIONS: In the space beside each item, write + if the student exhibits the competency to a high degree, 0 if the student exhibits the competency at an adequate level, - if the target competency is inadequately performed, and I. D. if you have insufficient data on which to base an assessment.

For each competency beside which you write +, please make a brief statement of explanation on the back of the sheet.

For each competency beside which you write a -, please make a brief explanation on the back of the sheet.

NOTE: It is likely that a number of your responses will be I. D., since the student in Secondary Block will not necessarily have an opportunity to demonstrate all competencies listed.

Please make a frank assessment of the student's work. Students in the Block are expected to make mistakes and learn from them prior to the Student Teaching Quarter, but they must have expert opinions about what their mistakes are. Data from this evaluation will not be used in building a file for future employment assessment.

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND MEMBERS OF THE HELPING PROFESSIONS.

1. _____ uses a variety of approaches (such as values clarification, transactional analysis, class meetings) to interpersonal relationships to achieve sound communciation with adolescents.

2. _____ uses professional personnel such as guidance counselors, psychometrists, and principals as required in teaching adolescents.

3. _____ encourages open and honest communication with cooperating teacher.

4. _____ accepts and takes action based on the constructive suggestions made by the coopetating teacher.

5. _____ resolves conflicts through objective, non-threatening means.

6. _____

7. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN A TEACHING FIELD.

8. _____ grasps content knowledge, skills, and prodecures associated with his academic discipline.

9. _____ justifies his selection of content from the academic discipline in terms of its suitability for a broad population of adolescents.

10. _____

11. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE AN ABILITY TO ORGANIZE AND IMPLEMENT A VARIETY OF INSTRUCTIONAL PLANS.

12. _____ in using small-group instruction, is able to provide a rationale for determination of group membership, group size, group task, and appropriate teacher role.

13. _____ constructs specific and measurable goals for his teaching field.

14. _____ designs an array of potential learning activities for goals he designs.

15. _____ designs activities closely related to student interests.

16. _____ designs activities within each student's range of challenge --that is, not too hard (frustrating) or too easy (boring).

17. _____ manages the element of time so that students have aminimum of unproductive time on their hands.

18. _____ formulates questions calling for varied intellectual behaviors, for opinions, or for divergent thinking.

19. _____ makes use of elements of adolescent culture--including popular music, dances, television programs, etc.--in his classroom strategies.

20. _____ generates plans that focus on developing career awareness.

21. _____ generates plans that focus on developing or clarifying values.

22. _____ generates plans that are consistent with research findings on the nature of learning and methodology in the teaching field.

23. _____ modifies in-progress lessons according to student feedback and/or time elements.

24. _____ arranges classroom to provide for suitable student interaction.

25. _____ uses voice so that students may hear and understand.

26. _____ varies his/her physical location while teaching.

27. _____ locates, adopts, and adapts teaching strategies from a variety of sources, including journals, curriculum guides, textbooks, ERIC, and teachers.

28. _____ devises plans suitable for either homogenous or heterogenous groups of adolescents.

29. _____

30. _____

31. _____

32. _____

33. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE SKILLS THAT WILL ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO PERFORM COMMENSURATE WITH THEIR ABILITIES.

34. _____ provides successful learning experiences for all students.

35. _____ displays student work in classroom

36. _____ responds constructively to student written work.

37. _____ reinforces desirable academic and intellectual behaviors.

38. _____ applies knowledge of cultural minorities to encourage student achievement.

39. _____ identifies individual and group interests, motivational level, value system, and acheivement.

40. _____ applies knowledge of the developmental needs of adolescents in his teaching.

41. _____

42. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE SELECTION AND USE OF APPROPRIATE MEDIA.

43. _____ uses and maintains varied instructional materials to support the instructional program.

44. _____ gathers instructional materials from free or inexpensive sources that will be of interest to adolescents.

45. _____ makes use of community sources to enhance teaching and learning.

46. _____ uses games to increase student involvement in learning.

47. _____

48. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE EVALUATION OF STUDENT PROGRESS AND INSTRUCTIONAL EVALUATION.

49. _____ designs, administers, and analyzes texts to assess student needs.

50. _____ applies knowledge about standardized test information--both its contributions and limitations--to assess student needs and instructional effectiveness.

51. _____ applies techniques of peer evaluation of student work.

52. _____ designs test items calling for complex levels of student behavior (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation).

53. _____ uses varied techniques in evaluation--contracting, open-book tests, group tests, portfolio of student work, student self-evaluation, and others.

54. _____ elicits student feedback about teaching effectiveness.

55. _____ engages in systematic self-evaluation.

56. _____ uses evaluation for the purposes for which it is intended--that is, avoid using tests and grades as artificial strategies to achieve student motivation.

57. _____

58. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN THE USE OF EVALUATIVE DATA.

59. _____ uses evaluative data from several sources to modify and improve plans.

60. _____ individualizes instruction on the basis of evaluative data.

61. _____ uses the special talents and experiences of his students in planning and modifying instruction.

62. _____ applies research knowledge in using evaluative data.

63. _____

64. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE A WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER FOR IMPLEMENTATION A VARIETY OF THEORIES, METHODOLOGIES, AND MATERIALS.

65. _____ appears to value the opportunity to gain knowledge of teaching strategies from professional journals, curriculum guides, teachers in the host school, and other sources.

66. _____ appears to derive satisfaction from the on-going task of preparing for the role of a secondary teacher.

67. _____ appears to be open minded about unfamiliar content and methods to be used in the secondary classroom.

68. _____

69. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT.

70. _____ uses classroom meetings, positive reinforcement, values clarification, and other positive techniques in classroom management.

71. _____ applies principles of group dynamics to achieve better classroom management.

72. _____ arranges the classroom to facilitate desirable personal behaviors of adolescent students.

73. _____ involves students in planning and in framing fair classroom rules.

74. _____

75. _____

BROAD GOAL: THE STUDENT WILL DEMONSTRATE COMPETENCE IN PERFORMANCE OF NON-TEACHING DUTIES.

76. _____ uses time-saving techniques in evaluating student work.

77. _____ completes grades, registers, and other records promptly and accurately.

78. _____ fulfills obligation to attend faculty meetings, seminars, and conferences regularly and promptly.

79. _____ uses on-campus seminars and conferences with the cooperating teacher to improve teaching effectiveness.

80. _____

81. _____

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS